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Letters

Being near a lit cigarette has risks — whether you're smoking it or not

A thorough reading of the recent Congressional Research Service (CRS) report on the health effects of environmental tobacco smoke (ETS) leads to very different conclusions about ETS than those stated by William Rusher in his Jan. 4 column "Miscalculation of the smoke signals" (Commentary).

The American Medical Association (AMA) and the majority of the health community agree that serious health risks are inherent in exposure to ETS, and we strenuously protest his facile assertion that physicians are "health fascists" who have manufactured a "scam" regarding ETS and health.

The CRS report makes two kinds of calculations for the potential lung cancer risks from ETS exposure, based on either a "no-threshold model" that implies no safe lower limits for ETS exposure, or a "threshold" calculation based on an assumption that only persons at the highest levels of ETS exposure are at risk. The authors are careful to point out that the "threshold" method is "a hypothetical example and does not mean that nay lung cancer which might result from ETS exposure would actually exhibit a threshold dose response behavior relationship." The basis for these calculations so gleefully cited by Mr. Rusher are two studies that, according to the CRS report, "provide some indication of the possibility of a threshold" — hardly iron-clad data for him to conclude that the CRS report "makes hash" out of the risks of ETS exposure.

Using the "no-threshold" model, the basis for the original Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) report, the CRS arrives at risk estimates almost identical to those of the EPA: about 2,800 lung cancer deaths per year among nonsmokers from ETS, compared with EPA's estimate of 3,300. The "threshold" method comes to about 440 deaths per year. The CRS authors admit that even if the threshold model were approximately correct, public health officials may still choose to use a model closer to the non-threshold approach in order to ensure that all populations are protected.

The CRS report also states, "If one accepts that there is a causal link between residential ETS exposure and lung cancer, then OSHA's [the Occupational Safety and Health Administration's] approach is at least partially valid. Further, if occupational ETS levels are similar to those in residential settings where excess risk was measured, then OSHA's estimate of occupational lung cancer risk . . . have merit."

The AMA, the American Cancer Society, the American Heart Association, the American Lung Association, the National Cancer Institute, the National Research Council and the National Institute for Occupational Safety and Health have all studied the questions of ETS and health, and all agree — the health risks of exposure to ETS are real, and the best approach to the problem is clean, smoke-free air for all.

LONNIE R. BRISTOW, M.D.
President
American Medical Association
Chicago

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